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# A Look Back at the Tangshan Earthquake and the Montreal Olympics

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Like many of the audience in China watching the round-the-clock CCTV broadcasts about the terrible earthquake in Sichuan, I thought back to the deadliest earthquake of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Tangshan earthquake of 1976, which also registered 7.8 on the Richter scale, but which killed 240,000 people. It occurred during the Montreal Olympic Games, which China did not attend because the Sports Commission was still mired in the Cultural Revolution and could not respond to friendly overtures. China would not be re-admitted to the International Olympic Committee until 1979. A section of the biography of He Zhenliang, the International Olympic Committee member in China (since 1981), evokes a vivid sense of life in those times and puts into context the tremendous changes in China over the last 32 years. Right now I am getting instantaneous e-mails from my friends and family in America, who are watching live broadcasts from China on their TVs. In Montreal in 1976 there were no live TV broadcasts and no direct-dial telephone calls to China, and it was several days before the Chinese delegation knew that the earthquake had not harmed their families in Beijing.

The biography was written by He's wife, Liang Lijuan, a journalist. It was translated into English by myself and published by the Foreign Languages Press as *He Zhenliang and China's Olympic Dream* (2007). Unfortunately this section, along with almost all of the other sections about the Cultural Revolution, were deleted from the English translation because they were said to be personal stories not relevant to China's sport history and of little interest to foreigners.

It is interesting to note that the Zhuang Zedong mentioned here was the same table tennis player whose friendly interactions with the American Glenn Cowan at the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships in Japan initiated the American team's visit to China, the first official American delegation of any kind to visit China since 1949. Illustrating the craziness of those times, five years later he was obstructing "ping pong diplomacy."

Excerpt from the end of Chapter 6, 梁丽娟, 《何振梁与奥林匹克》 [Liang Lijuan, *He Zhenliang and Olympism*] (Beijing: Olympic Publishing House, 2001)

## Never-ending "suffering correction"

[...] After Comrade Xiaoping returned to supervise their work and the situation had just started to straighten out and show some positive prospects, things suddenly collapsed again.

At the time the table tennis athlete Zhuang Zedong had already been officially appointed as the Director of the Sports Commission and authority over the entire Sports Commission was systematically held in the hands of people who shared his way of thinking. The former high jumper Ni Zhiqin became the head of the International Department. All the slogans raised by Zhuang Zedong and his buddies were in opposition to the methods advocated by Premier Zhou and Xiaoping, about whom they said that their tactics "worshipped foreign things and toadied to foreign powers" and were "capitulationism." Everything was criticized and negated, sometimes to a laughably absurd degree. For example, they regarded referees as expressions of "capitalist

privilege;” they didn’t assign places in competitions and there was no separation into first, second, or third; and they even twisted the spirit of “friendship first” so that no competitions reported scores and recorded points; and so on. In sum, the more “left” everything was, the better it was. [...]

The management of the Sports Commission by Zhuang Zedong and his buddies was also absurd. At the time the newly-elected president of FIFA, Joao Marie Havelange, accepted an invitation to visit China. Havelange was friendly toward China and one of his election promises was that he would do what he could to resolve the membership of the People’s Republic of China in FIFA. However, when he visited China the leaders from the Football Association and the International Department of the Sports Commission who met with him were extreme leftists. That visit did not produce many results. After the Cultural Revolution when Havelange and Zhenliang were chatting about that visit, he said, “At the time I really didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I visited as a friend of China and wanted to discuss how to handle the problem of restoring China’s rightful place with them, and never expected that when I arrived in China I would be taken as an imperialist element and given a good talking-to.” The president of the Hong Kong Football Association, Henry Fok, accompanied Havelange on his visit and afterward he told Zhenliang that when the Sports Commission people met with Havelange they all gave him a lesson in politics.

[...] When would the Cultural Revolution finally come to an end, when would normal living conditions finally return to the nation and to his own home? Although they wanted Zhenliang to abandon the sports diplomacy that he had done for so many years, he could not bear to leave it, but those intolerable difficulties often made him just want to go back to school to teach or to the Foreign Affairs Ministry that had wanted him in the past. However, transferring posts was not something that an individual could solve, and although he often wanted to do it, he was ultimately unable to make it happen. During that time there were unbearable days when “you can’t do what you want to do, can’t go where you want to go.” He sometimes truly felt that the days wore on like years.

The 1976 Olympic Games were in Montreal, Canada. At that time China had already gradually recovered its rightful place in a few international sport federations, and had newly joined a few. This time the Sports Commission had no choice but to use his “talents” and allow him to accompany Zhao Zhenghong and Ni Zhiqin to the international sport federation meetings held during the Montreal Olympic Games, and then to visit Mexico and Panama after observing the Olympics.

During the Olympics, the Tangshan earthquake occurred back at home. The reports of this big news outside China were chaotic and Zhenliang learned the news from the television and radio. Some reports said that Beijing was also affected, so he and the others were extremely concerned. At the time it was difficult to hook up with domestic news – there were not direct-dial telephone calls like today and you had to go through the embassy. Finally, at long last they heard that Beijing had not been seriously affected and that the cadres and families of the Sports Commission were all safe and sound, and only then could they relax. Every day Zhenliang repeated in his thoughts a line from a poem he had memorized, “但愿人长久，千里共婵娟” [“If only humans could reach past time and distance to touch the beautiful woman in the moon”], in order to send his heartfelt concern to his loved ones. When he returned from his trip, the initial

chaotic conditions from the earthquake had already settled down. His family members had already left the temporary earthquake sheds built by the roadside, and were living crowded together with many others inside the garage that belonged to the department. During this year, in addition to natural disasters, China lost several of its most loved and respected revolutionary leaders. The repeated catastrophes put people everywhere into low spirits.

At the end of September 1976, the Ministry of Education borrowed Zhenliang as a adviser to their delegation to the UNESCO session in Nairobi because sports problems were to be discussed at the meeting, and also there was to be a preliminary discussion about forming an Intergovernmental Sports Committee. Just before the delegation set out, the evil “Gang of Four” was toppled from power, but the news had not yet been publicly announced and only secretly circulated inside the delegation. Everyone was so excited they could hardly contain themselves; at long last they could finally hold up their heads.

When Zhenliang came back from the UNESCO session he heard the irrefutable news that the “Gang of Four” had fallen from power. Everyone felt as if they had experienced liberation. [...]

The ten years of the Cultural Revolution were finally over, and the great mountain pressing on our heads was finally pushed off. Although the best years of our lives, which had been wasted, were gone forever and could never be regained, it was worth celebrating that although we had passed through all kinds of torment, no one in the family had lost an arm or a leg, we were all mentally sound, we could still use the rest of our lives to do many things. We have a photo album at home with photos of children from small to big. In the front section there are so many happy ones, but at the end are some taken during these ten years. Everyone in these photos wears a dull expression and a forced smile. Going through the hardship of these years, we all forgot how – or were unable to – laugh. The record of this photo album abruptly stops at this point – there is nothing pasted after it. Let us end let this period of heartbreaking history here, and in the future our family will write again of a new life.

After our beautiful country had once again been restored to order, life turned over a new page. The sun shone again on every corner of the land, laughter again filled our warm home. Zhenliang hoisted the sails, put out to sea, and sliced through the waves on behalf the development of Chinese sports, so that China could fulfill its great potential in the cause of international sports.

**Tags:** [The 2008 Beijing Olympics](#)